

Decorated Celtic sword scabbard from Balassagyarmat

Find circumstances

In 1965, József Ódor, a resident of Balassagyarmat presented a number of finds to the Palóc Museum of Balassagyarmat that had probably come to light in the inner city area. The finds included medieval pottery fragments, a rusted iron axe, a fragmentary sword scabbard and a strongly corroded iron chain. Unfortunately, no notes were taken aside from the name of the finder and the date when the finds were presented to the museum; since then, a number of finds were discarded, of which no records remain either. It is therefore also possible that the finds have become mixed up with other ones. What is certain is that after the relocation of the archaeological collection to Szécsény in the early 1970s, the finds of two different periods — the Late Iron Age and the Middle Ages — became part of the same unit. The fragmentary iron sword scabbard and the iron chain undoubtedly belong together culturally, but probably also as regards their original context. The single find, whose chronological position is uncertain, is the iron axe, which will not be discussed here owing to the possibility that it became mixed up with these finds.

Analytical procedures

The form of the scabbard, the suspension loop and the chape can be easily made out with the naked eye, while the details of the ornamentation often remain hidden. The sword was submitted to a number of analyses. A drawing was made of the scabbard before its restoration and several X-ray photos were taken with varying exposition times in order to examine the different metal layers. Several digital photos (with 600 and 1200 dpi resolution) were made of the scabbard after its restoration, enabling the analysis of the scabbard by microscopic enlargement. The engraved pattern of the scabbard was also examined using a binocular microscope. The drawing was prepared using the photos and the results of the microscopic examination (*Fig. 1–2*).

The form of the scabbard

The description of the finds and their typological ordering is based on De Navarro's monograph

(DE NAVARRO 1972) and Lejars' (LEJARS 1994) refinements of this typological scheme.

As far as could be made out from the fragments, the front plate and the reverse tapered evenly towards the tip. The largest width at the scabbard mouth was 5,6 cm, although it seems likely that the original width had been around 6 cm. Even though the fragments cannot be joined, the scabbard's original length can be reconstructed: it was about 65–70 cm judging from the widening of the surviving fragments. The scabbard did not have a midrib.

Type of overlap

Scabbards were usually made from two separate metal plates by folding the wider one over the narrower one. In this case, the front plate was folded over the reverse, although the overlap does not extend over the entire scabbard, ending a little above the chape.

The scabbard mouth

The scabbard mouth is regularly rounded along the front plate (De Navarro A1, Lejars 1); traces of an earlier repair can be made out since the line of the curve cuts into the pattern. The mouth on the reverse is slightly pointed (De Navarro A2, Lejars 2) and probably rose above the curve of the front plate.

The two parallel lines engraved on the ornamented front plate suggest that the mouth was perhaps reinforced with a metal band riveted to the scabbard at its edge (in this case we may assume a Lejars 7 reinforce). This possible reconstruction is indicated by the fact that the two parallel lines widen into a curve, suggesting that they had encircled a rivet head or a circular applied ornament. No indications of a reinforce can be made out on the reverse.

The suspension loop

The suspension loop, fashioned from sheet metal, was riveted to the reverse with two rivets. It has a rounded rhomboidal form, with the upper part more rounded than the lower one (Lejars 9). The suspension loop has a length of 4,5 cm, a width of 2,2 cm, the strap control is 1,7 cm long.



Fig. 1. Balassagyarmat — La Tène iron scabbard and sword chain
 1. kép. Balassagyarmat — La Tène vas kardhüvely és kardlanc

The chape

The V shaped chape protecting the lower part of the scabbard (De Navarro B1; Lejars 5A1) was made from a single metal plate. Its total length was about 25 cm since traces of the chape-bridge can be noted at a distance of 12 cm and 25 cm from the tip of the chape. The chape was folded

over the scabbard. The length of the chape end is 4,4 cm; there are two small bosses (measuring 6 mm) on the upper part and there are two additional, slightly protuberant chape clamps (0,6×1 cm) for ensuring a secure attachment.

Ornamentation

The surviving fragments of the scabbard, and especially the ornamented mouth of the front plate, are heavily burnt. The surface of the hammered iron plate was blistered and cracked in many spots, making the reconstruction of the pattern rather difficult. What can be ascertained is that the ornamental pattern was restricted to the section under the mouth (Szabó–Petres 1a₁) and that it was made up of parallelly engraved lines. The surviving sections of the pattern indicate that the pattern was divided into two parts by the band bordered by the two lines under the scabbard mouth. It has been mentioned above that a reinforce may have been attached to this part. The upper part of the pattern became unproportionately short owing to the repair of the mouth, and a part of the ornamentation may have been lost in the process. The identifiable motifs in the lower part indicate that the decoration was symmetrical along the axis of the scabbard. The reconstructed pattern can be assigned to phase II of the Hungarian Sword Style, characterised by a more abstract spirit in symmetric and

diagonal designs. This stylistic tendency is best exemplified by the scabbards from Bölcske (sword I: SZABÓ–PETRES 1992, Cat. no. 5, Pl. 7), Mokronog (SZABÓ–PETRES 1992, Cat. no. 128, Pl. 119. 2) and Halmajugra (SZABÓ–PETRES 1992, Cat. no. 16, Pl. 16). Phase II of the Hungarian Sword Style can be

dated to the LT C1 on the basis of its typological traits and the known find contexts (SZABÓ–PETRES 1992, 48–50).

The sword chain

The sword chain is made up of figure-of-eight links made from globular sectioned iron wire whose ends were hammered. The last link of the chain is threaded into a larger ring with a pair of three incisions facing each other, two of which are strongly worn.

Rapin assigned this chain type to his type F1, dating this group to between 260–230 B.C. (RAPIN 1995, 284–290). The analysis of the Chotín/Hetény, SK/ cemetery revealed that this chain type first appeared in the second phase of the cemetery, corresponding to the LT B2/C1 transition (GEBHARD 1989, 83–92).

Evaluation of the finds

The find circumstances of these finds are rather uncertain and after the elapse of thirty years they can only be reconstructed to some extent from the articles' state of preservation. Even though the surviving fragments cannot be joined, they undoubtedly came from the same scabbard. The corrosion on the interior of the plates suggests that a sword had been kept in the scabbard and that the sword had been folded in at least one place. The scabbard and the sword chain both show strong traces of burning, suggesting that they came from a cremation burial. It seems likely that the sword scabbard and the twisted sword chain came from the same context.

On the basis of its chape, the scabbard can be assigned to group B of De Navarro's Middle La Tène scabbard types (DE NAVARRO 1972, 151–200). On the other hand, the chape, the scab-

bard mouth, the reconstructed length of the scabbard and the overlap type corresponds most closely to Lejars' group 5A in the typological scheme based on the swords from Gournay-sur-Aronde, corresponding to the LT C1 chronological horizon (LEJARS 1994, 35–36, 49–52). It must be borne in mind, however, that both typochrono-

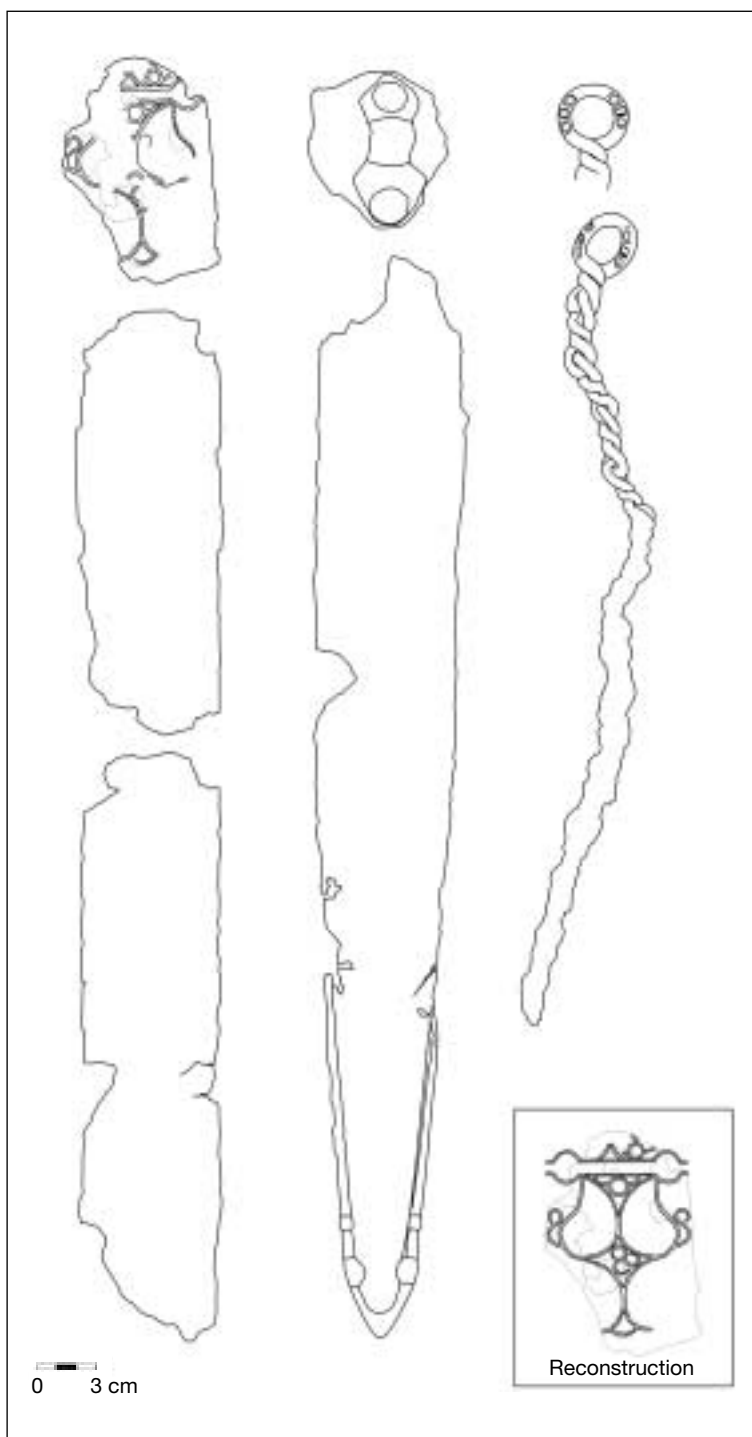


Fig. 2. Balassagyarmat — La Tène iron scabbard and sword chain
2. kép. Balassagyarmat — La Tène vas kardhüvely és kardlánc

logical schemes were elaborated for a representative site and that they are in general valid for the artefacts from that particular region — in other words — these two chronological classifications must be treated with caution in the case of distant analogies (SZABÓ 1974, 246–251). Swords with a comparable scabbard appeared in the third phase of the Chotín cemetery in the Carpathian Basin, corresponding to the LT C1 horizon. It would appear that the sword chain is slightly earlier since this type appears in the second, late LT B2/C1 phase of the Chotín cemetery (GEBHARD 1989, 83–92). This slight chronological difference does not contradict the assumption that the finds came from the same context, which can thus

be dated to the LT B2/C1 phase of the Late Iron Age.

The decorated sword scabbard and the sword chain from Balassagyarmat, as well as a number of other finds brought to light earlier in this area indicate that there was a major Celtic cemetery in this area, probably on the ridge by the Ipoly river under the centre of the modern town.

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